

10 December 1984

KUWAITI JET HIJACKING

* * * * *

LEHRER: An American view of it now from Stansfield Turner, retired Navy admiral and former head of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Carter administration. Admiral, what is your assessment of how Iran handled this thing? STANSFIELD TURNER (former CIA director): I think it's very difficult to say that they could have done it faster or better. One can see how it could have been done better and faster. But we just don't know enough of the facts at this point. I think we have to give them the benefit of the doubt that they moved as expeditiously as they thought they could. Now if Iran was not supporting terrorism around the world and was not a pariah in that regard, they could have called on us or the Germans or the Israelis or other people to come in, and real experts to help them, and it could have been solved quicker. But on their own resources, perhaps they did as well as they could.

LEHRER: Is the problem here, ah, the reason that people are so suspicious of the Iranians is because they're so tied to terrorism? TURNER: Well, we can't pin on Iran at this point that they collaborated with the hijackers, but we have a lot of cause to be suspicious--the point you've just made, that they've been supporting terrorists, anti-American terrorists, particularly in Beirut, at least there seemed to be a lot of good intelligence reports, ah, the point that Robin just made that they have demanded the release of the same people that the hijackers wanted. But I can't see how they could storm that airplane and very few people get injured if any and certainly none of the hijackers, from what we know. But, again, we haven't got all the facts, but it certainly is a suspicious element. At the same time, the real test is going to come when the Iranians do what the ambassador says they're going to do, take them before the law in his country. There seems to be little doubt that those hijackers committed some very heinous crimes, torture and, of course, two killings of Americans. If they don't receive some real meaningful punishment, then I think our suspicions should be heightened even more. In the meantime, we've gotta give them the benefit of the doubt. But let's be duly skeptical until we see if they take some meaningful action against these hijackers.

LEHRER: There was, as I'm sure you know, Admiral, a lot of people who were very careful with their words today until those two Americans are even out of Tehran. The ambassador just said, though, that they will be free to leave. Any reason to question that? TURNER: Well, he's

Continued

2.

here in the United States and not in, in Iran. But I think we ought to, again, give them the benefit of the doubt, not cast too many aspersions on them until they don't perform, in this case, either not let our people out tomorrow, as we expect, and over time, not bring these people to trial or not give them a meaningful sentence, you know. They can bring them to trial and slap their wrists, and that won't be very satisfying.

LEHRER: Did the scenario that the ambassador just laid out make logical sense to you? TURNER: Yes, it made sense in the degree of 'get the women and children and other people, as many out before you have to storm the plane.' The real issue is did it take that many days to go through all that process? And, again, until those Americans come back and we really can get a debriefing from them, it's a little, little early to tell whether they moved as rapidly as they could have.

LEHRER: What kind of assistance of the West Germans or who else, what kind of assistance could they have given the Iranians in settling this earlier? TURNER: Well, we've trained Army special forces teams to storm an airliner like that, to, to take it quickly and decisively, probably with considerable loss of life on the part of the hijackers. I would suspect the Germans, the Israelis and others have teams that are also well prepared for that. The Iranians had some choices if they wanted to go around the world and ask for very skilled assistance in this.

LEHRER: Uh huh. There, there were reports today as well that these terrorists may have even been trained in Iran or not, maybe not directly, but indirectly somewhere else. Is that also what troubles you the most about this whole thing? TURNER: Yes, it, it really does. And any country that supports terrorists, for whatever purpose, can find that they'll come back to bite. And that may be what happened there. They may not be in collaboration, but they may have trained these people, and it's caused them a problem as well as us.

LEHRER: There's also been much talk, of course, about how the United States should have played this the last six days. What's your assessment of how we handled this? TURNER: I think we did about all that we could, under the circumstances, since there is no way we could actually do in and advise or provide military support for it. We'd have to have been asked by the Iranians to do that, and their animosity to us at this time I think certainly precludes that.

Continued

3.

LEHRER: But, of course, everyone keeps saying we must do something about terrorism. The administration has spoken out dramatically about it. And yet, these incidents keep happening. Are they just always gonna continue to happen, Admiral? TURNER: The West Germans have got the Bader Meinhoff under control. The Italians have got the Red Brigades under control. We've got hijacking under control in our own country. Why? Because all three of those countries have taken strong measures to curb either terrorism or hijacking. We've got to be the leader of the world now in galvanizing the responsible countries of the world to take action against terrorism worldwide. In this case, for instance, we ought to investigate where those hijackers got on board and were the inspections at that airport meaningful. And if they're not, the international aviation authorities oughta ban those airports until they get meaningful checks of people carrying weapons or explosives on airplanes. In this case, if the Iranians don't come through and really punish these people, I think we ought to head up a move to just ban all international air traffic from going into Tehran. We ought to ostracize people like this. In a place like Beirut, we should now be demanding that the Lebanese establish a network of intelligence agents to really comb the back streets and find out where suspicious actions are going on. We can't do that for them. But they can provide us much better support, and it's so in many other countries. I think there's a lot can be done without rushing off and saying, 'Well, let's bomb a whole lot of people and kill a lot of innocent bystanders in order to get five or six terrorists.'

LEHRER: Admiral, thank you. TURNER: Surely.

* * * * *

EXCERPTED